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The Intellectual Bombthrowers

How the Institute for Policy Studies Tries to Remain Existentially Pragmatic While Subverting the Establishment

By Stephen Clapp

"IF THIS WERE 1773, and the city were Boston, the Institute would be holding a seminar on British imperialism. There would be tables and charts to show the injustice of the tax on tea. Probably somebody from the Governor's office would be invited. Then, independent of the Institute, six or seven of the fellows would go out and dump a shipload of tea into Boston Harbor."

Speaking is Karl Hess, one-time Barry Goldwater speechwriter turned "radical libertarian." The Institute is the Institute for Policy Studies, 1520 New Hampshire Avenue; the fellows there consider themselves the most important political science faculty in the nation. Hess, who led a seminar on the Old Right and the New Left as an associate fellow, sees his colleagues as the Thomas Jeffersons and Sam Adamses of the Second American Revolution.

"I didn't know what a radical was until I came to the Institute," Hess says. "I now find it's the sort of person Barry Goldwater used to be. I've always admired Goldwater personally, and I wish he could attend some of the seminars. He would like the ideas on neighborhood government; they are the active embodiment of his political principles. He might even modify his views on imperialism."

Many Washingtonians have heard of the Institute for Policy Studies, but few know just what it is or what it does. The reader may know that Marcus Raskin, a co-director, was indicted and acquitted in the celebrated Boston anti-draft conspiracy case; or that Arthur Waskow, one of the Institute's most active fellows, led a "Freedom Seder" in April on the anniversary of the 1968 District riots. Many times I had walked past the Institute's four-story town house near Dupont Circle and seen blacks in dashikis and students in Movement denims lounging on the steps. This fall, after having written a long critique of local universities ["Will Our Universities Hang Separately?" July 1969 WASHINGTONIAN], I decided to find out what makes the Institute the obviously exciting place it is.

It is impossible to understand the Institute without knowing its history.

The half-dozen young men who conceived the idea of an independent research organization were bright young government aides and scholars in the Kennedy years. Schooled at the nation's most prestigious universities and graced with abundant professional opportunities, they were nonetheless frustrated and unhappy. Despite successful careers, they felt they were working on trivial matters. The really important issues—if confronted at all—were the province of researchers at universities and government-sponsored think-tanks. Early in their planning, the founders decided that their institute would accept no government contracts or consultant fees, thus preserving the integrity of the Institute's primary mission: independent research.

"We were convinced that the problems of America were not technical or managerial, but moral," says Raskin. "To have a truly meaningful discussion of those problems it was necessary for us to get out of the hierarchical structures that were shaping our intellectual approach. We were very critical of 'objective knowledge,' realizing that much of what we had been taught contained hidden ideology and propaganda."

Waskow is more blunt.

"Everyone assured us that we had received wonderful educations. In fact, they were terrible. Experience taught us to remake all our conceptions of society. We saw that the country was on the road to destruction, yet nobody was paying any attention. The big questions were all being studied by people on contract to the government. What we suspected in 1963 has become a gut-felt reality now. Government is incapable of studying its problems honestly."

Before founding the Institute, Raskin had been legislative counsel to a group of liberal Congressmen and a member of the special staff of the National Security Council. Waskow had been a legislative assistant and a senior staff member of the Peace Research Institute.

The other founders were:

Richard J. Barnet, who had worked for the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. After becoming co-director of the Institute, he wrote two major books, *Intervention and Revolution* and the recently published *The Economy of Death*.

Robb Burlage, who had served as research director for the Planning Office of the State of Tennessee. Since becoming a fellow, he has undertaken a study of urban health problems and analyzed the use of resources in Appalachia.

Christopher S. Jencks, who had written on education and poverty issues for *The New Republic* and other magazines. With David Riesman, he published *The Academic Revolution*, a study of higher education. Jencks is presently directing an allied institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Milton Kotler, who was a lecturer at the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions in Chicago before joining the Institute. He was instrumental in founding a community corporation in a Columbus, Ohio, ghetto neighborhood. His recently published book, *Neighborhood Government*, grew out of that experience.

Donald N. Michael, who was a senior staff member of the Brookings Institution. He joined the Institute to study the political impact of technological change; he is now at the University of Michigan.

For the Institute's founders, it was not enough to leave their jobs for an ivory tower where they could think Great Thoughts. They felt they could gain fresh insights only by becoming directly involved in social change. By bridging the gap between involvement and detachment, they might be able to enliven their research and have greater impact on policy.

Practically, this commitment to action has involved the Institute in an array of projects and social experiments, some successful and some not.

Intellectually, it has led the fellows to subscribe to a philosophy of "existential pragmatism," which Raskin discusses in a forthcoming book, *Being and Doing*. Pragmatism is a favorite word of conservatives, who use it to justify acquiescence in existing power arrangements and cooperation with elites. Raskin argues that power arrangements historically lose their utility and become unjust and absurd. It is the social scientist's duty to perceive irrationality and to bring about alternatives. Crucial to perceiving irrationality, however, is the existential willingness to identify with the oppressed and powerless. In *Being and Doing*, Raskin notes that social thinkers have traditionally "stood off" from their subjects

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instead of "standing with," them.

"Imagine a lecture hall," Raskin writes. "A professor stands on the stage and talks about ethics and stands off from others. Someone yells, 'Get off the stage and come *down* with us.' A colonizing role has ended and his humanness has been reached. . . . When a group of students at Howard University jump on stage during a Founder's Day ceremony in which honorary doctorates are given and the students make demands for changing the university *while* some pour water from the president's pitcher into his glass *for themselves*, 'standing off' as a viable authority principle has ended."

Together with Barnet, Raskin spent six months in 1963 raising funds from foundations and private donors. Major contributors included the Edgar Stern Family Fund, the late James P. Warburg, the Samuel Rubin Foundation, Irving Lauck, the Institute for International Order, the Ford Foundation, the Milbank Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund, the Jacob Ziskind Trust, and the Palisades Foundation.

To oversee the Institute's $225,000 annual budget, the founders assembled a blue-ribbon board of nineteen trustees that included the founders themselves. Among local members are Philip Stern, chairman, and Robert Herzstein of the law firm of Arnold & Porter. Other prominent trustees include Arthur Larson, who was Under Secretary of Labor under the Eisenhower Administration; Gerard Piel, editor of *Scientific American;* James Dixon, president of Antioch College; and Hans Morgenthau of the University of Chicago. The trustees appoint two co-directors annually—Raskin and Barnet have served in this capacity since the beginning—with the consent of the other fellows.

There are several categories of membership in the Institute. The nine "resident fellows" hold appointments similar to those on a university faculty and earn between $10,000 and $20,000 for the academic year. Until last spring there were no Negroes among the resident fellows, which placed the Institute among the few self-styled radical institutions in the nation that had not achieved racial equality. Three black resident fellows have been granted three-year appointments, and they presumably will receive full tenure eventually.

There are no women resident fellows. Here again the Institute made up for lost time last spring by appointing two young female "visiting fellows," both active in the Women's Liberation Movement, in an effort to compensate for apparent discrimination. "Visiting fellows" are mostly young former Institute students who are granted salaries of something under $10,000 each to pursue their interests for a year. The Institute also has "associate fellows," a legion of outsiders who come to lead and participate in seminars.

For several years the Institute took in students—there were nearly twenty in the academic year 1967-68—but the practice was discontinued this fall. The Institute had no curriculum, and both students and fellows were embarrassed by the absence of traditional teaching. The Institute does maintain ties with a number of associated colleges and universities, including Antioch College, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Illinois, Reed College, and the Virginia Theological Seminary. Instead of students as such, there are now "research fellows" who are given stipends to write a book or undertake a project. Fellows in all categories are chosen by the resident fellows; it is a casual process in which personal contacts count more than formal academic credentials.

When the Institute opened in 1963, the fellows saw their function as studying issues and providing ideas to politicians. Institute seminars have attracted a long line of Congressional aides and Federal executives, including a sizeable number of Republicans. One noteworthy Republican alumnus is Stephen Hess, who conducted a seminar on the future of the Republican Party as an associate fellow in 1965. Hess invited young Republican Congressmen, survivors of the 1964 Goldwater debacle, to hear thinkers ranging from Paul Goodman, the anarchist, to Karl Hess, the then-conservative. Stephen Hess' success as a party theoretician was crowned this year when he was appointed a special assistant to President Nixon in the area of urban affairs.

Whether Republican or Democratic, seminar participants are characterized by youth and restlessness. The senior leadership in Congress and the bureaucracies has had little time for what they regard as the Institute's ideological frivolities. "It doesn't make sense to invite the politicians anyway," said one aide on the Hill. "They just take up time and inhibit discussion."

In its relations with Congress, the Institute is alert for issues that are sources of political dissatisfaction. Among seminars and task forces during the current academic year are such titles as "The Corporation in the Corporate Society," "Housing and Property," "Privileges Within Institutions," "The Impact of Defense Spending on the Economy," "National Security Research Program," "Technology and Social Space," "Communications Industry," and "The Third World and Revolution." Most seminars are open to the public, but seminar leaders must grant individuals permission to participate.

Last spring the Institute sponsored a seminar on military procurement led by Richard Kaufman, an economist with the Joint Economic Committee and one of the main figures in the Senate revolt against defense spending. Kaufman telephoned Congressmen's offices, asked "Who works on defense spending?" and received an enthusiastic response from twenty-seven aides working in that area.

"As a Congressional staff person I had become concerned about the inability of staff to get outside the barriers to independent information," Kaufman said. "One of the main barriers is the executive branch itself. By surrounding Congress with so many briefing messages, the agencies make it impossible for you to do much else but keep up with their information. This is a real constraint on the effective operation of government. It has been my experience that the Institute is the only group in Washington that has enough interest in the legislative branch to work with it without trying to manage it or control it. The Institute believes that providing Congress with good ideas is a major mission. If it has done nothing else, it has done that."

As the nation's political crises have deepened, the Institute fellows have asked themselves whether providing ideas is really enough. Since the Institute strives for pure democracy, this question is discussed constantly. The fellows, staff members, wives, children, and occasional trustees ("the Institute family") gather regularly to cook and eat and talk. Once or twice a year the Institute family assembles for a two- or three-day soul baring *cum* picnic at which the members discuss the institution's future direction.

"It's a family, all right," a girl on the administrative staff said wryly, "but, like all families, it has lots of internal quarrels."

Reconstructing these family quarrels is difficult for an outsider, but it is helpful to imagine the Institute as a left-of-center microcosm of the academic world as a whole. The conservatives are the older resident fellows—writers of over twenty books and 2,000 articles. They are the defenders of intellectual inquiry and academic standards. To their left are the black fellows, who believe the Institute should divert its energies and funds to the exploited poor. Finally, there are the young visiting fellows, who also call for more collective projects and more relevance to community concerns. While a generation gap may seem strange in an avowedly radical institute, it is nonetheless there. The older fellows are strong individuals who battled their way out of the conformism that permeated the Eisenhower 50's. Their inheritors, on the other hand, came of age during the welling up of idealism in the 60's.

"The times change too fast for an institute like this," one of the younger fellows said. "Sometimes I'm amazed that it has kept up so well. Other times I wish it had kept up better.

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"I sense a collective movement that the older fellows do not feel. It wasn't my individual brilliant break with the Establishment that brought me here. The older fellows' work is tied up with the idea of a career. Basically, the Institute is a 50's thing rather than a Movement thing."

Similarly, the black fellows criticize the Institute for its academic orientation. Ironically, they turn Raskin's criticism of social thinkers against him, charging that the Institute "stands off" from social problems by accepting foundation money to pursue its own concerns.

"The Institute makes its living off the fat of the land," said Frank Smith, a former SNCC organizer who is now developing cooperative food stores in ghetto neighborhoods. "Our independence is financed by the blood, sweat, and tears of the poor. We have an obligation to return to them not just ideas but creative institutions.

"Sure, there have been projects, but they have been small in scale, and the Institute has not had to spend any of its money or its influence to get them started. It used to be that the Institute was the only place radicals could conduct academic research. That is no longer true. Now, the only way to distinguish ourselves is through project development."

Smith's views are echoed by Topper Carew, who organized the New Thing Art and Architecture Center while an associate fellow in 1966 and 1967. Carew thinks the Institute's primary service to organizers such as himself is to provide financial support "while we clear out the cobwebs in our heads."

"The Institute doesn't have a race problem, but it does have an intellectual problem," he said. "Even though the Institute is one of the most sensitive places coming out of that intellectual bag, it still doesn't relate to non-intellectuals. It can't get close to that cat on the street who's just trying to survive. And I figure any institution that's in a city ought to relate to that city."

Despite such criticisms, the Institute is miles ahead of any other Washington academic institution in supporting social experiments. Besides the New Thing, the Institute has encouraged the growth of: the city's two underground newspapers, the *Free Press* and the *Quicksilver Times;* the Center for Emergency Support, which enabled whites to assist victims of the District riots in 1968; Federal Employees for a Democratic Society; the local chapter of the Committee of Returned (Peace Corps) Volunteers; Jews for Urban Justice; and the Drum and Spear Bookstore. Most recently the Institute has been working with the Urban Law Institute and the United Church of Christ in an attempt to deny license renewal to station WMAL-TV on the grounds that it fails to serve Washington's black community.

Central figure in all such efforts is Arthur Waskow, the Institute's genial black-bearded guru. Between writing chapters on a book about the year 1999, Waskow manages to appear at nearly every political meeting or demonstration of consequence in Washington. In August 1968, Waskow was instrumental in getting the Rev. Channing Phillips nominated as a favorite son Presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention. Waskow is probably the greatest single reason that the Institute maintains what credibility it does have among blacks and young people.

"We take blacks and students seriously," Waskow said. "We argue with them, and we don't play games with them. We listen and learn. And when we agree, we don't go hide under the bed."

"Arthur is extremely creative," says the Rev. Channing Phillips. "Sometimes I think he is too creative. But his involvement in the community has been very useful. The Center for Emergency Support was particularly helpful when the riots came; everybody else was caught with his pants down. Lately he has become interested in community control of the police. It's good having a white group supporting 'black' positions."

Beyond its academic traditions, there are limits to the Institute's activism. Raskin is fond of speaking of the "space" in which the fellows can operate. One boundary on that space is the income tax laws, which define what sort of activity is permissible for a foundation-supported institution. The Institute raises the hackles of such Congressional conservatives as Sen. Strom Thurmond, who has declared that by granting a tax exemption for the Institute, "our government is allowing tax exemption to support revolution."

Shortly after Raskin's indictment in the Boston antidraft conspiracy case, the Internal Revenue Service ran an audit of Institute expenditures. More recently the fellows have become concerned about Congress' proposed tax reform crackdown on foundations, which would levy a one hundred percent tax on "any attempt to influence legislation through an attempt to affect the opinion of the general public or any segment thereof, and any attempt to influence legislation through private communication with any member or employee of a legislative body, or with any other person who may participate in the formulation of the legislation." Excepted activity would be "nonpartisan, objective research," with the Secretary of the Treasury granted the discretionary power to determine objectivity.

During the final week of September, the Institute family gathered from all over the nation for a week of intensive debate on the future. It was indispensable that since 1963 the Institute's activities and influence had expanded enormously. But what would its mission be in the coming years? Should it continue as a collection of Great Thinkers, or should it become a task force aimed at specific social problems?

"Remarkably," Raskin reports, "the militants within the Institute felt that now was a time for deep analysis. They felt we were only beginning to find out what there is to be known and what there is to look at. People were talking up 'action' in the beginning, but by the end there were profound theoretical discussions."

Essentially, the fellows agreed to disagree. Or, more accurately, they agreed to pursue their individual interests while discussing with one another certain common concerns. They would try to distinguish movements from fashions and be very critical of any concentrations of political power. On moral issues the fellows would try individually to "stand with" the oppressed, but they would not abandon their intellectual concerns in doing so.

"I think the Institute has shown that scholars can work in an honest, independent way," Raskin comments. "If things don't become too repressive in this country, I think we will see a new kind of social science and politics. As the universities collapse, the best people will leave and experiment with new modes of education such as ours."

Already, the Institute has begun establishing satellite institutions elsewhere. Christopher Jencks, one of the original fellows, is directing the Cambridge Institute, which will concentrate on urban problems. An institute is under way in Berkeley, California, to study environmental problems. Among the planners of a proposed Atlanta Institute is Julian Bond, the young black political leader.

"It is our independence that distinguishes us from the think-tanks," says Richard Barnet. "The universities and think-tanks are working on problems *for* somebody. Always, there is the question in the back of the mind, 'Will the government give us the next contract?'

"Every day we get phone calls from professors wanting to come here to work. It's no longer satisfactory for them to think or teach where they are. The universities can't do the job that has to be done. They are too much a part of the problem." □

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